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SUBJECT: CHILD MARRIAGE IN YEMEN: HALF THE CHILDREN ARE MARRIED

REF: STATE 36341

11. This message is in response to reftel questions on child marriage in Yemen, see para. 4.

12. The legal age of marriage in Yemen is 15. UNICEF estimates that approximately 41 percent of Yemeni children under the age of 15 are married. According the USAID-funded Development and Health Survey (DHS), 64 percent of Yemeni girls under the age of 18 are married, making Yemen fourth in the world for the highest incidence of girls married under 18 years of age. In order to respond to reftel questions, EmbOffs met with UNICEF, OXFAM, local women's NGOs, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA).

13. DCM met with Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Abd al-Karim al-Arhabi on March 8, who also serves as the Director of the Yemen Social Fund for Development (SFD), to discuss the problem of child marriage. The Minister reported that both child marriage and violence against women are significant social problems in Yemen. Child marriage, said Arhabi, is socially accepted in Yemen and contributes to low levels of women's education, increased poverty, and health risks. According to Arhabi the ROYG has not yet embarked on public awareness campaigns on the negative effects of child marriage because the issue is too sensitive in Yemen's traditional culture. The Minister indicated, however, that if the U.S. funded an NGO to tackle the issue in Yemen, he would support the effort.

14. Below is Post response to reftel questions:

A1. The legal age of marriage in Yemen is 15 for both girls and boys. This law, however, is not enforced and child marriage, particularly in rural areas, is common place. Girls routinely marry upon puberty, around 12 years of age, and boys tend to marry between the ages of 15-18.

A2. There are no statistics available on the rate of child marriages in Yemen for boys or girls. Girls commonly marry at the age of 12, and boys tend to be roughly three years older than their brides.

A3. Since the law requiring children to be 15 in order to marry is not enforced, there is no mechanism whereby children under the age of 15 may marry with parental consent. A male relative of the bride may, however, sign the marriage certificate without the bride's consent.

B1. Post believes underage marriage (i.e. younger than 15) is a significant problem in Yemen. Exact data is difficult to obtain. According to UNICEF estimates, 41 percent of children under the age of 15 are married.

B2. Yemen has a poor health care system and relies heavily on the assistance of donor nations. This is especially true in rural and remote areas where child marriage is the norm. There are no statistics available on the negative health consequences of early marriage for Yemeni girls. It is likely, however, that given the poor or non-existent access of many Yemeni girls to modern health care, that health complications associated with early marriage are exacerbated in Yemen.

C1. Currently there are no U.S.-funded initiatives in Yemen that aim to reduce the incidence or address the negative effects of child marriage.

C2. A public awareness campaign and health care assistance programs seem obvious first steps to reduce the incidence and address the negative affects of child marriage in Yemen. Post requires more time to thoroughly investigate this issue before recommending specific programs or NGO partners. Post would need to enter into a dialogue with Ministries of Health and Education regarding this issue.

C3. USAID has existing programs in Yemen that provide basic education and training on women's health issues. These programs have not addressed the issue of early marriage due to cultural taboos and political sensitivities, but it is possible that efforts to address the problem of early marriage could be incorporated.

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